

# Xena, One Sore Appaloosa

Karen has had Xena, a 10-year-old appaloosa mare, for three years. When Karen bought her from a friend in Sydney, the mare had borne two foals and done some halter showing, but little else. Xena quickly settled down in the Coffs Harbour area, although she developed Queensland Itch, which is fairly common in this humid area. Despite her relative inexperience, Xena proved to be a very sweet-natured girl and a willing mount: “she is light and responsive, one of the best horses I have ever ridden”, says Karen. Together, the pair set about preparing for Western pleasure and trail classes.

Twelve months ago, just when she was going really well, the mare had a fall in the paddock, pulling a front shoe off with her hind. The resulting lameness seemed to disappear after just a few days, so Karen had the shoe replaced. However, Xena didn't seem right. So Karen, an owner who believes in erring on the side of caution and taking things slowly, gave her four weeks off before restarting work. This time she found Xena to be fine in walk and jog, but unwilling to lope. She would get there with a little persuasion, only to drop out after a few paces. Something was wrong.



Three sessions with an equine masseur followed, involving work on wrenched muscles in the off shoulder. All seemed well enough, so Karen began work with Xena again and entered a show. By now, it was August, five months after the initial incident. Xena did what was asked of her, but Karen still found her to be a bit slow, with persistent stiffness down the off side. It remained impossible to pinpoint what was wrong, or whereabouts the problem lay.

That very weekend, the EI lockdown began across NSW. With no shows to aim for, it seemed a good enough time to give Xena even more time off.

This January, Karen asked me to take a look at Xena. The lockdown was lifting and Karen wanted to do whatever she could to help the horse before getting into the saddle again. If the Equine Touch didn't help with this elusive problem, she would have x-rays done, and if they failed to show up a problem, Xena would become a broodmare.

Our first session was on a rather damp January morning. Xena was displaying the slightly worrisome side of her personality, fretting about being separated from her field mates. This was separation anxiety was entirely understandable: she had barely left the paddock in four months. However, it did make for a less relaxed session than normal.

(I couldn't help but feel somewhat lame myself – having arrived in Australia on the day the Lockdown started, I counted Karen and Xena as being amongst my earliest clients in the area. Now, despite my keen explanation of the modality to people who had never come across it before, the horse I was working on failed to show any positive responses whatsoever!)

Despite Xena's anxiety, her body told its own story. She still had a great deal of painful tension down her offside, as well as through her shoulders and neck. There were some obvious areas of muscular overdevelopment, caused by months of compensating by the problems we were starting to uncover – two loud adjustments from her offside pelvis indicated where the worst of the problem was. This was a start to her recovery, although we still had a way to go.

The second session was a couple of weeks later. This time the weather was finer and we worked with Xena's favourite paddock mate grazing nearby. This worked better and Xena was a little more relaxed. Today, she displayed no signs of pain in the hindquarters, so it was possible to lift up her hind legs and do some mobilisation work. This would help her to understand that she was no longer restricted in that area and didn't need to protect it with limited movement (this is like a form of mental 'reprogramming').

The fact that Xena wasn't particularly relaxed did not mean that she wasn't involved with the bodywork experience. On the contrary, on this occasion she decided that it was time she took charge of the proceedings by telling her new visitor exactly what needed to be done next. Her signalling took the form of some dramatic neck stretching, as she repeatedly reached down and forwards, twisting her head in a snaking action. As I worked up her mid-neck, her reasons became clear: I encountered spasm around the wing of the atlas, painful enough to have Xena backing up across the yard as it was addressed. Afterwards, she gave her head and neck a good shake and relaxed, although it did seem that she still couldn't quite let herself go.

Two weeks later, I returned for our third and final session. Xena was looking different by this stage, softer throughout her body, while her neck looked significantly finer and smoother. There was no issue with relaxing this time, for as soon as the work started, she sighed heavily and let her head drop. She could see her paddock friends, but no longer seemed concerned about joining them – she was happy to be there with us, enjoying the process. As Karen put it, Xena was “well and truly in the zone”.

The bodywork showed up some remaining areas of minor tension, but nothing that appeared to be causing significant pain. Yet Xena hadn't quite finished telling me what to do. As I placed my hand on her near stifle to perform a move, she turned round and started vigorously grooming my backside. I removed my hand and she stopped. I replaced it and she started again. Now, this isn't the normal response you'd expect with this move, which is marked 'Danger – take care!' in the Equine Touch students' manual! This was Xena making sure I knew what was needed (perhaps this sounds familiar to some Appaloosa owners?). Doing my best to interpret her request, I performed the move and made some extra moves around the inner leg, upon which Xena returned to “the zone”.



From Karen's point of view, it was lovely to see her horse change so much over the course of three sessions. Both of us had seen Xena clearly expressing where her issues were and then indicating, through her eventual relaxation and obvious enjoyment of the bodywork, that the problems were resolved. Karen reported that the positive changes weren't only confined to the Equine Touch sessions. On a day-to-day level, Xena has been far more relaxed, having lost a certain fidgetiness when, for instance, tied up at the fence for the hose. “We also seem to have more of a connection between us,” she says.

From my point of view, the way in which Xena's personality came through more and more as the pain released its pressure on her body and mind was delightful. Her case certainly demonstrates the extent to which a fall can affect the horse's whole body, both through the wrench caused by stepping on a shoe at gallop and the impact of the landing itself. The beauty of a holistic approach is that all the secondary problems are addressed as well as those that are more obvious – in this instance, any that were almost missed were pointed out by Xena herself.

Karen says that Xena is doing just fine these days. They lope on some training sessions but not all – she still believes in progressing slowly but surely – and Xena has showed no problem with the gait change. With a renewed level of physical comfort and a stronger bond, the pair are now busy training for pleasure and trail classes at a forthcoming Western show. Look out for them in April in the Grafton area!

*Jane Clothier is an Equine Touch instructor and practitioner based on the Mid North Coast of NSW. Having emigrated from the UK in 2007, she is now running courses in the Equine Touch throughout NSW and practicing in the Coffs Harbour area. More case studies involving horses she has met since her arrival (and since the easing of the lockdown) will follow in future issues.*

*Jane can be contacted on*

*Ph: (02) 6658 6086 / 0447 672 523.*

*email: [jane@equinetouchnsw.com](mailto:jane@equinetouchnsw.com)*

*Full details of Equine Touch courses can be found on the Australian Equine Touch website:*

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